APOLLO AND THE SEAMAN

BY HERBERT TRENCH



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BY

HERBERT TRENCH

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APOLLO AND THE SEAMAN

I

A POLLO through the woods came down Furred like a merchant fine, And sate with a Sailor at an Inn Sharing a jug of wine.

Had sun-rays, spilled out of a storm, Thither the God conveyed ? Or some green and floating cloudlet caught On the fringes of a glade ?

For none had known him by his gait Descending from the hills, Though far and wide before him blew The friendly daffodils;

No shepherd had discovered him On upland pasture bare By dew-pond or green Roman camp; No voice aloft in air

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Along lone barrows of great downs With kine in rolling coombes, Where bells blow up from all the plain To headlands spring perfumes,

Proclaimed him to those coombes and folds Of little lambs unyeaned, Or sung him to the billowy woods With spray of buds begreened, Where spreads in haze the snowy maze Of orchards deep-ravined—

Telling the dingles of the thrush To overflow with sound, Warning the grassy commons all In vales for miles around :

"Wake! shady forest-coverts wide! Wake! skylit river-sward! Chases and meres and misty shires Be ready for your lord!"

But he would not stay nor tarry there On the blithe edge of the down, To the sea-coast his errand was And the smoke-hanging town.

Far off he saw its harbours shine And black sea-bastions thronged With masts of the sea-traffickers For whom his spirit longed. 2 Far off he heard the windlass heaved And the creaking of the cranes, Gay barges hailed and poled along, And the rattling fall of chains,

Till by the windows of that Inn He sate and took his ease Where the bowsprits of the swarthy ships Came thrusting to the quays.

Π

Apollo. "And why are you cast down, sailor? The rumour. And why are you cast down? With lapfuls of the guineas light Come you not back to town?

> Your feet that must have run in air Aloft the slippy mast Are they not glad to land, my lad, On steady ground at last?"

Up from his brown and branded hands A heavy chin he raised, And sidelong through the harbour bluffs Looked out like man amazed.

Seaman. "If you had cruised as I have cruised The world for many a year, Your blood like mine it would have struck At the strange news I hear. O the Moon went riding high last night And the dance along the quays, But I could not find it in my heart To care for shows like these;

For while still I felt the rollers' lift Bear on through the dark land And the little houses here still rock And sway—they would not stand—

I heard them calling in the streets That the ship I serve upon— The great ship Immortality— Was gone down, like the sun. . . ."

III

Apollo.	"And whence did that craft hail, sailor, Of which you seem so fond ?"
Seaman.	" It was some harbour of the East, Back o' beyond, back o' beyond ! "
Apollo.	"What shipwrights' hammers rang on her, The stout ship and the leal? In what green forest inlet lay Her cradle and her keel?"
Seaman.	" I think some arm of the sea-gods Framed us her stormy frame, And ribbed and beamed and stanchioned her, And gave her strength a name. 4

The Ship.

Never, Sir Traveller, have you seen A sight the half as fine As when she hove up from the East On our horizon-line ! "

"I have seen a dead god on the Nile, Apollo. Paddled by tribes of bronze, Under mud-built villages of palms Glide, statelier than swans, And Isis' frail moon-golden skiff Restore him to that barque of life Whose years are millions.

> I have seen Jason and his men Into bows of Argo piece Oak of Dodona, ere she slid To find the golden fleece; Ay, and triremes of the marble isles Pursue from Salamis.

I have seen master-galleys rise Dipping in mass the oar, And centaur-carven caravels, And galleons big with ore, Dromonds, and mountain'd argosies That sack the globe no more:

Great sails, like yellow weeping clouds, Heap'd thunder, roaring squall-And their fadings, like the fleet of stars That floateth over all."

Seaman. "Well—ask all navies such as these— Was she not more divine Who, challenged by Death's muffled drums, Gave Death the countersign ?

> Ah, to serve on her in time of war ! Why it set aflame your blood To feel her in the slack of peace Come booming up the flood,

> Thousands of wings about her bows As she cast away the deep, The morning star swung from a spar And every sail asleep.

And her masts ! Land-locked and shut away From the sea-winds' scud and psalm, Her masts, they trembled in a leash— You laid on them your palm, And they quivered over with great life That never could be calm.

No frothings in your purple wake On the lone path to the pole White as the spread of sail on her That lent wings to your soul—"

Apollo. "What was her build, that boat of yours So proud upon the sea? What was her make of hull and deck, What suit of sails had she?" 6 Seaman. "O her stretch of sail so white, so white, By no man's hand unfurled, Was Heaven !"

Apollo. "And the decks you kept so bright?" Seaman. "Were like this bustling World."

Apollo. "And the hold and cockpit out of sight, Pitch dark and ill to smell, Full of the friends of your delight?" Seaman. "That was the pit of Hell!"

IV

Seaman. "How think of her, gone down, gone down ! The tidings. How think of her decayed ! Or that the maker of that ship Could let his creature fade ! More unbridled — unforgettable — was never creature made.

> Gone by the board, those swinging spars That seemed through storm to climb ! Sent down, like any cockle-shell, To the tangle and the slime !

Did he that takes the narrow sounds His monstrous hands between Whirl her among his crazy locks Into an eddy green ?

Was it fog-bound, on a foul coast, With not enough sea-room, Or clear of land that she was lost, Where the hard gale can blow home? Was it ice-floe in the sheeted foam Ambushed her ? or some ledge Of false lights—or uncharted reef— Broke her back upon its edge ?

Perhaps even she was seized at last Off some island precipice With weariness, like man's weariness, Of everything that is,

And stranded so till the fresh flood That through the channel swings Crumbled that side like a sea-cliff As one crumbles little things."

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- Apollo. "Her end was none, my lad, of these; But first, if you must know, Mutiny of those friends of yours In irons down below."
- Seaman. "And how got you, Sir Merchantman, This news-or bitter jest?"
- Apollo. "Sir, my trade is bringing light to all From the East unto the West.

Nay, he that built your famous boat From the old coasts to fly And bear you ever out and on Was I, and none but I ! " 8 With that the sailor clutch'd the board ; Wine spilt out of his glass Dripp'd to the floor, but not a sound From his parch'd mouth would pass.

V

Apollo (musing). "There was no whisper out of space, Scarcely a ripple ran From thine incommensurable side O dim leviathan, The tale of Apollo.

When from afar I came in flight, Rumours 'gainst thee to probe, Leaving far off, engraved in shade, Many a dreaming silver globe And approaching thee on the middle sea Wrapt in my darkling robe.

From that Ship becalm'd, that triple-tier'd Of Heaven and Earth and Hell, Spread strange commotion as I near'd Over the starred sea-swell.

Arcturus, I remember, shone— That rebel ! mirror'd bright, And Saturn in his moat of moons Glass'd in unsounded night; All the million-litten vault below Breathed, in a slumber light.

В

9

As in some mountain forest glade When frosts ere dawn are brisk And early spring boughs knitted close Across the red moon's disk,

And the rimy turf rings hard to hoof Of the light branch-feeding deer, One sees upflushing some glen's brow Camp-fire of mountaineer

Bivouack'd below ; shag-bearded pines, All gnarled, loom down estranged At the wanton fire about their knees With the moon-fire interchanged—

So strange her gaunt dishevelled spars Loomed down out of the sky; Sails that had drunk Earth's soul immense Hung pierced and slung awry,

My inwoven eternal blazonries An idle tattered shame. Was this the keen fire-spirited prow Ark of the heaving flame

That sun-stampt and illumined ship, That keel of mystery, Loosed, after toilings beyond count, To plunge from the Daedalian mount And to stem futurity ? Now, because mine own insignia badged Each white celestial vail, Rage seized me, like your emperor Trajan—how goes the tale ?— Who on Tigris, twice defeated, tore His gold wolves from the sail. . . .

And as from forge doors in her decks Escaped, lulled, rose again, Confused blasts—insolent uproar From torch'd and naked men, As it were some wind from Africa's Tropic and demon'd fen.

And beast-like shadows ran and flashed; Knotted at grips they swayed And writhed. Unkennelled Hell was loose And swarmed in escalade.

Hard-pressed my righteous stood at bay; But when Hell's desperate brood Saw me, they shouted, '*Lord of light*, *Release* !' And ruinous strew'd, Fell on their faces on the decks In breathless multitude.

But their leader, with inverted torch, Stepp'd through them. Stern he comes, Stirring their night-bound forest hearts Like distant savage drums,

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ΙI

And cries aloud, 'In this, in this— Shaking his torch—is peace! Not thou, tardy deliverer, But I, confer release !

Mighty shall be the high sea-flame ! Superb the funeral pyre Of Heaven and Earth ! . . . Kindle it, Hell ! To glut this God's desire !'

He paused, with black distorted arms Rear'd, long before the crash— Like some hollow oak that long outliveth Coil of the lightning's lash;

Then fell. Majestic enemy, Time with thy falling rang ! He, first of all the ship, was free And fled without a pang.

Out of the throng'd expanse, skull-bare Heads rose and dropped again. They quailed, they flinched before my gaze, My light to them was pain. Shadows of wreckage on the masts Went streaming down the main.

Stooping above one cowering shape, I raised it by the chin, Upturned the pallid chronicle And read the tale therein; Read the thing purposed, by the bone, And the thing done, by the skin. The lecherous, wan, with eyelid lined, Heavy-soul'd, torn with vice, The murderous with the flitting smile, The drunkard blue as ice ; Incomplete and colourable things Whose breathings must be lies.

All the sweet neighbours that men take Within their breasts to thrive Had blown like glass the body's case Or stamped its clay alive. So I mused—(All hung upon a hair !) Why need the dead survive ?

In one face, stony, white and bleak, Had passions scooped their bed; Old lavas down the rigid cheek, Meseemed, were still unshed;

And I read the eyes of him that thirsted Only for things beyond; Whose strata, tossed in molten dreams, Would never correspond With things about him, for he willed To die unparagoned.

Unseen above them so bowed down Like bent and sodden corn, Should I cast them with derision back, That throng of the forlorn, Herding them with derision cold As with a hand of steel, Condemn them to endurance back And still to think and feel, While the tears that might not fall for them Did on my cheek congeal ?

And in that pause their mournful hope Swelling like the undertone That dins within the wildest gale Utter'd aloud mine own.

Blindly they stretched their scarry hands, Their piteous hands, to me : 'Since bonds we cannot bear, nor sight Be thou our sanctuary ! Open again the narrow gate— Let us no longer be !'

Then lo! my righteous, whose wounds still With bitter conflict bled, Veer'd in their wrath, hoarsely unjust, Arraigned me for these dead— Spat on their own high bliss, and craved To stand in Hades' stead.

Had all white-priested Egypt, then, Not taught thee to perdure, My Boat of Years ? Lo, in man's dust So mixed—so long impure— Came light ! Then I summoned up each soul 14 And round its neck secure Fastened this token : 'Judge thyself,' That justice might be sure.

Aloft, long since, I saw, had fled That viewless sanhedrim Of presences starry-cresseted Who erst through waters dim Had breathed the towering sails along, My faithful seraphim.

. . .

And I turned about in mournfulness Steadfastly to behold Bulwarks charred, ay, and drunken masts And slow deep-labouring hold,

And the heeling of age-crumbled beams And helmless spars divine— Beheld the horror of those decks Bloodied with mystic wine; Even the little fluttering genius reft From the wrecked and flameless shrine.

And I cried to the white shape on the prow Ascendant by my skill, 'O winged ardour, headless now, To sound what wild sea-victory Swing'st there, triumphant still ? Why spared they wholly to shatter thee ? Thy rippling veils from feet to breasts Winds from the future fill But I know my handiwork outworn, And this bolted fabric vast That disciplined through many wars Man's courage in the past,— And well, well, hath she served her Lord— Unseaworthy at last !'

Then from ocean's frothy hazardous Dream-element I caught Her crew—every half-foundered soul Wherewith her hold was fraught;

And I sang them back to steady Earth After their wanderings long, Both quick and dead. Hangs on thy breast The token of my song?"

(He fumbled in his hairy breast Yes—the '*Judge thyself*' hung there) "And remembering then their mad outburst Of quaint hope and despair

Who deemed each puny life should last When nothing else escapes, And the nations and the planets melt Like breakers on the capes,

From laughter, from tears unquenchable, Scarce able to forbear, I smote the great hull to a ghost And the mighty masts to air. ."

16

Seaman. "What ! is there not even left enough Of that so noble craft, A gang-board or a plank or two, To lash into a raft ?"

Apollo. "No, lad; you shall not ride in her; But then you shall not weep; Nor hear aloft her pipes of cheer Nor the wail under the deep.

> Yet sometimes like the Northern Lights Hull-down—a radiance dim— Loftier than air of Earth, up-sprung To planes beyond its rim,

At hours when you are fever-struck A phantom you may see, Derelict-drifting out of hail-Lost Immortality ! "

VI

When the man knew the ship he loved The rebuke. Had melted to a lie He fronted him upon his feet As who should Gods defy— Syllables choked not in his throat, He met him eye to eye.

Refreshed was he through long forborne Anger. His spirit swelled Manful—the stronger in his grief By all that he had quelled. Seaman. "This is your world-discovery ! This is the great landfall ! This coil of warehouses and quays And taverns—this is all !

> Well was it that we trusted you ! Else—how had we achieved Good luck ? But then we had a friend Wholly to be believed.

This is the country we have gained, This land of milk and balm ! For this our innocent took wounds And died without a qualm, Drawn on as by a ghost, that ends Like a catspaw in a calm !

Stay ! I have heard, how in action's heat A captain in his tent Sealed a despatch ; and the rider died That with the letter went; But the letter—saved—was found a blank. You, who the message sent, Say, how will you now make amends For what was vainly spent !"

Fell off, fell off the enshrouding furs— The beamwork of the room To its last crevices was lit; So terribly illume The God's eyes—all his presence seemed Outwardly to consume 18 As though all burning sovranties And throbbings of the mind, Condensed into a single flame, Across that board confined Shot the human shade, a skeleton, Clean on the wall behind The man.

Apollo.

"Ah, fragment of my soul, When I invented thee To utter Mind, as guest and mate Of a voiceless family,

And gave thee selfhood, barred with sleeps, On yon ship's heaving shelves, Selfhood that never can contrive— However lightning-like it strive— To escape, in its inmost, deepest dive My Self *beneath* your selves,

I built through demiurgic powers, Myriad human hopes and fears, And laboured at this shipwright's task A hundred thousand years.

Think'st thou I framed a vessel vain As earthly ships of wood ? Or that thy voyage never was, And wasted all your blood ? What ! Hast not felt the invisible Nor faintly understood ? Thou hast seen armies serve a name, A rag, a tomb forlorn; And the tides of men obey a ghost, The ghost of the unborn.

Thou hast felt the Passions' blindest roots Quake up man's silly crust, And rock thy reason from its state And crack its towers to dust.

Thou hast seen the Gods figure forth races, Surging out of the vast On the crest of wave after wave, for aye To sweep till time be past :---

Feel'st thou no wind *behind* those waves All washing on one way ? Organs of the invisible Yes, thou hast felt their sway !

Deem'st those old faceless images, 'Truth,' 'Justice,' 'Liberty,' Heralding symbols *thou* employ'st ? *They are employing thee* ! Organs of the invisible Yes, thou hast felt their sway. All the buried city of thy heart Knows thou art less than they.

But now get back upon high seas Unknown and drear indeed, Thou, the adventure of my cloud And sailing of my seed !" 20 Seaman. "Lord, I confess the things unseen Closer the fountain-head Than the wooden table in my grasp Or yonder loaf of bread; But must we, ever-living one, Go out when we are dead? When the arms that held us close and dear, When the love that we are used To mingle with, are wrenched awa y And the body's kiss is loosed?"

> The God smiled, and with 'haviour soft Leaning across the wine Heavily took those shoulders young Into his grasp divine.

Apollo. "Hearken! I put you to the touch My son, my prodigal— Since every brave song hath its close Your own life, end it shall; Yes, utterly shall meet an end. Be it heroical!

> And, born aboard, my rover stark, Dread you to die aboard ? To lay you down beside your love With the sunset on your sword ? . . .

"Voyage after voyage, how else, how else Apollo Should I man's soul prepare tinuing). For the new venture, bolder yet, On which he now must dare ?-

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The New Ship

See ! from the voyage whence you come now You come not back the same ; Behind the door of your dull brow Hath sprung up doubt and blame-

Defiance of me. That I praise. This once low-cabined pate Hollows deep-chambered-is become Tribunal-hall of state For the assembled thrones of angels-root For an assize of fate !

Thou hast forgotten, whom I took From lap of things inform And flung to embraces of the sea And caresses of the storm ! Now electrified, subtler-energied, Starker-willed, battle-warm Thou comest, thou comest again to me ! . . . Son of tumult, gloom enorm, I have new jeopardy for thee And new eyes yet to form ! 22

O wrestler into consciousness Stand upon Earth! Away! Long hath the journey been by night, But roseate breaks the day; Like a scroll I unfold the mountain-tops And the windings of the bay.

Awake ! thou'rt already on the cruise And shalt not see its end. Earth is the ship ! Thou shalt have time To find the Earth thy friend !"

Seaman. Apollo.

"Is there a hand upon her helm?" "Weigh thou thine own heart-fires, And her wash of overwhelming dawns, And her tide that never tires— Her tranquil heave of seasons—flowers— All that in thee aspires !

How like an eagle on the abyss With outspread wing serene She circles !---thought rolls under her And the flash from the unseen. Here's to her mission, wingéd rock, Bluff-bowed and heavy keel'd Through the night-watches swinging on Still under orders sealed !

No crystal gives a peep, my son, Of her errand far and surgy; No witch's magic brew of sleep Nor smoke of thaumaturgy; Nor, for the future, shall you reap Much benefit of clergy. But if thy former priestly ship Failed of the port assigned, The overwhelming globe takes on Her altar-flame of mind. See that the oils that feed the lamp Fail not !"

Seaman. "What are those oils?" Apollo. "Heroic, warm, abounding souls! These are the sacred oils On the fragrant thin-flamed thymele Lost on the deep like melody— They who, as I My Self disperse In them through the tragic universe, Scatter themselves in toils.

> And I shall stream into their life Waking—sense after sense— New understandings—endless, no, But more and more intense. Till joy in the will that wafts the world Buoyant as swimmers be Makes thee divine, perhaps at last Wholly delivers thee."

Seaman. And the man exclaimed, "Delivers me ! How, if this death descends ? I am a man and not a race. What matters, if self ends ? Speak ! quick, my brain is worn and cold, Little it comprehends." 24 " I shall tell thee, but as music tells. I too, like thee, have striven. I too am launched from the profound And past; I too am driven In turn upon the stream of storms From fountains beyond heaven; And to me, too, light is mystery And the greater light half-given.

Apollo.

How can I make plain the goal obscure Of thy journey but begun ?" And again the God smiled on the man And asked, "Hast thou a son ?" He nodded. "And never yet hast guessed That thou and he are one ! Yet leaf shall of leaf become aware On the selfsame bough and stem, Whose branches are murmuring everywhere And the heaven floods all of them !

Between you—*between all that love*— Runs no gulf wide nor deep, But a sheen'd veil, thinner than any veil, Thin as the veil of sleep.

Through the death-veil—looming silverly— Through the self-veil's subtle strand, Dawns it not ? For that dawn thy heart Hath eye—shall understand Before its seeing rock-walls melt And cracks the mortal band. For when once the whole consummate strength Of thy slow-kindling mind Can see in the *heart's* light at length All the strange sons of mankind, Then the Earth—that else were but a strait Rock-sepulchre—is new: Of what account to it is death ? It is glowing, through and through, It moveth, alive with a God's breath, Translucent as the dew ! "

VIII

The last words in the rafters rang And the bright haze sounded on ; Walls, air and shadows vibrant still, But the God himself was gone.

Was the thing dreamed? The Tavern wall Solid? Still it rang. Feverish he threw the lattice back Outside fluttered and sang Trees of a tract of narrow yards Behind dark tenements, The nearest garden vacant—rope Eked out its broken fence. Naked it lay—brown mould bestrewn With refuse crockery—yet A pear-tree in its darkest nook Bowered it in delicate Whiteness. Beyond its further pale 26 The embarcation

Above a wall-flower bed, Women were hanging linen out : One stoop'd a kerchief'd head. In lime-trees idle rooks were cawing; Even to his upper room Came wafted from some distant plot Fragrance like thyme's perfume ; And, adrift from zigzag chimney-stacks • And ancient courtyards, soft Blue smoke was breathed amongst the trees; Dazzling clouds moved aloft; Even to the window where he stood A cherry stretched its limb, Half the diaphanous clusters clear Enlumined, and half dim. Green swift immortal Spring was here-Spring in her lovely trim-And whether it were ship or no, The Earth seemed good to him. Had he been Greek, or nurtured well In lore of sages gone, He would have felt her like that ship Ascribed to Hieron Which, beside its deck-house luxuries Of baths and bronzes fine, Carried a pergola's green walk, Shade-galleries of vine, And for awnings fruit-espaliers From buried urns in line.

Quitting the Inn he made for home, And by many a cobbled wynd

Behung with mariners' wares, uphill He strode with seething mind. Above in the shady market-place Unwonted silence reigned. Under their patched umbrella stalls Few flower-sellers remained; But one, with old face like a map Wrinkled by good and evil hap, Stretched forth her palm. It rained. Ah, yes, it rained-sudden acold The sky loured overcast. Soon the pavements leapt with plashing drops; And as he hasty passed He heard a burst of chanted sound, And glanced up at the vast Shadow that over huddled roofs Loomed, pinnacled and grey. . . The spired cathedral thundrously And widely seemed to sway; Like Earth upon her pilgrimage Buffetting on from age to age, It still was under way.

And on he trudged with peace at heart, Rain pelting on his cheek, But the shower half-ceased before he found The bourne he seemed to seek.

A small house in a by-way dark Beneath that April cloud, And nigh the doorway he looked up Keen-eyed. He could have vowed 28 It was his wife stood shining there, Yon, where the lintel dripped. With soft, profound, familiar look Low-laughing forth she slipped;

Her mute nod warned him (while her hair Released bright drops that fell) And bade him watch, but not disturb, A happy spectacle.

Now vapour'd were the cobble-stones, And the runnel where they stood Fleeted adown the middle street, Rays gleaming on its mud, When lo! he saw a boy, their son, Squatted beside the flood,

Like the city's sole inhabitant And lost to aught beside, Wholly absorbed, aloof, intent. Upon that ruffling tide

The boy embarked a faery ship Of paper, white and gay, And watched, with grave ecstatic smile, Its glories whirled away.

THE END.

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